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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002592

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CONTINUES PEACE AND SECURITY DIALOGUE
WITH ARMED FORCES CHIEF OF STAFF

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a November 19 private breakfast with the Ambassador, Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano said that his recent trip to the PACOM-sponsored Chiefs of Defense Conference in Bali, Indonesia had been productive from a regional security standpoint, particularly with regard to building a stronger relationship with his Indonesian counterparts. Yano said Philippine military was still pressing the fight against rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leaders in Mindanao, whose attacks against civilians and government forces over the last three months had displaced thousands and temporarily disrupted the ceasefire between the government and MILF separatists. Yano confirmed that President Arroyo was monitoring the situation in Mindanao closely and that the government remained committed to peace negotiations with the MILF, but had to provide for civilian security first. Yano highlighted the military's successes against rogue MILF commanders and agreed that although the military had the moral high ground in the current conflict, restarting civil-military operations was key to maintaining public support for the armed forces. He suggested that the military would seek to wind down current operations in central Mindanao by Christmas. The Ambassador voiced concern over the persistent problem of extrajudicial killings and encouraged Yano to strengthen the military's capacity to address the issue. Commenting on the current internal political scene, Yano said that despite the military's firm commitment to remain out of politics, he was frequently prodded by various powerbrokers to get involved, which he was firmly avoiding. END SUMMARY.

BUILDING STRONGER REGIONAL TIES AT CHOD CONFERENCE

2. (C) During a private breakfast November 19, Philippine Chief of the Armed Forces General Alexander Yano told the Ambassador that he had benefited greatly from his recent trip to the PACOM-sponsored Chiefs of Defense Conference in Bali, Indonesia November 10-14. Yano said that although the conference focused on a wide range of defense-related topics, humanitarian assistance was one he was glad to see receiving a great deal of emphasis. Yano highlighted dialogue with his Indonesian counterpart as being productive in strengthening the burgeoning military-military ties between the two countries, but lamented that unfortunately, he was not able to engage his Malaysian counterpart as effectively.

BUILD ON MILITARY'S SUCCESSES IN MINDANAO TO PROMOTE PEACE

13. (C) Yano said that the Philippine military still was pressing the hunt in Central Mindanao for rebel Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) commanders who had unleashed a series of attacks on civilians and government forces following the breakdown of peace talks in August. Yano emphasized that the armed forces were intent on re-establishing security for the civilian population. He noted that the military had the high ground and, to avoid losing support, would need to conclude operations soon. As the MILF guerrillas increasingly used ambushes and smaller units to attack the military, Yano said his troops would have to reassess their tactics and maneuvers, but still guarantee public safety. Yano thanked the Ambassador for recent U.S. support in the capture of a key terrorist -- Jemaah Islamiyah facilitator Hajiruddin Dansalan -- November 2 in Mindanao.

14. (C) Yano emphasized that President Arroyo had made the conflict in Mindanao a top priority and was regularly querying military commanders on the status of the operations while personally monitoring the government's handling of internally displaced persons. As evidence of her concern over the situation in the southern Philippines -- and to highlight the improvements in security -- Yano pointed to Arroyo's decision to hold a full cabinet meeting on Jolo November 20, an event that in recent years would have been precluded by security concerns. Yano agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that it was imperative to reinvigorate civil-military operations in Mindanao, not only to provide assistance to the displaced, but to further diminish support for lawless elements by demonstrating the benefits that sustained government presence offers in more remote areas of Mindanao. Yano said that the Philippine

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government remained committed to resuming peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and hoped that a ceasefire and resumed talks might be possible by the end of the year.

AMBASSADOR STRESSES MORE ACTION ON EJKS

15. (C) The Ambassador raised the persistent and potentially damaging problem of extrajudicial killings with Yano, stressing the importance of continued progress in eliminating all such killings, and investigating and prosecuting those crimes that had taken place to date. She underscored that illegal actions by the police and security forces undermined public trust and set back efforts to bring stability and economic growth to the most distressed areas of the Philippines, especially Muslim Mindanao. Yano listened with concern. He repeatedly has made public statements on the need for the military to exercise discipline and work through the legal system.

MILITARY STEERING CLEAR OF POLITICS

16. (C) Referencing the recent ouster of Senate President Manuel Villar on November 17, Yano said it had caught the military by surprise, although he thought it was a power play by the other senators vying for the presidency in 2010. Yano added that while there had not been any recent overt attempts to co-opt the military leadership, he frequently was queried by key political figures on the military's stance regarding the political situation. Stressing that this was a nuisance more than a serious problem, Yano emphasized to the Ambassador that the military was avoiding such distractions, but that they underscored the persistent desire of a minority to involve the armed forces in the political process.

COMMENT

17. (C) While the Philippine military continues its disciplined campaign against rogue MILF leaders in Mindanao, Yano's admission that the government needed to look at a timeline for concluding operations and re-engaging the MILF on the peace process points to the potential end to the fighting in the near term. Whether this is because the Philippine military has exhausted its supply and personnel reserves and will be unable to prosecute the campaign much longer, or whether it reflects a recognition that the government should capitalize on the gains they have made to date, is unclear. Logistical support for the Philippine troops has become a problem and the government is considering diverting military modernization funds to cover materiel replenishment costs. At the same time, the military has had success in securing areas of Mindanao previously outside of government control. Seizing on an expected Christmas lull in the fighting could give the government the opening to downscale operations against the rogue MILF and restart a dialogue with MILF leadership on the peace process. Senior Philippine officials are committed to the dual strategy of reducing the threat of violence to civilians in Mindanao while developing a way forward in the peace negotiations, but knowing when to declare victory in the current conflict will be key to maintaining public support. END COMMENT.

KENNEY